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CENTAUROMACHY AND AMAZONOMACHY IN GREEK ART: THE REASONS FOR THEIR POPULARITY

UNLIKE the Romans, the Greeks, in most branches of their art, made little use of recent historical material.¹ This is pre-eminently true of their monumental sculpture. During the great central period of Greek art, the Fifth and Fourth Centuries, B.C., there is no known Greek building whose sculpture represents a recent historical event, excepting the Temple of Athena Nike ("Wingless Victory") at Athens.² The usual themes are mythological, and of these certain ones enjoyed especial popularity. A few great mythical contests, viz., that of the Gods against the Giants, those of Greeks against Centaurs, against Amazons, and against Trojans, supply subject matter to an impressively large number of decorative Greek sculptures. Of these themes the centauromachies and amazonomachies were the most often repeated. Thus, among the works of the Fifth Century, battles with Centaurs were to be seen at Athens; in painting, within the Theseum and, in sculpture, on twenty-three metopes of the Parthenon, on the sandals of the cult-image in that temple, on the western frieze of the "Theseum" (falsely so called), and on the shield of the colossal bronze statue popularly known as the Athena Promachus; at Sunium on the frieze of the Temple of Poseidon; at Olympia in the western pediment of the Temple of Zeus; at Phigalia (Bassae) on the frieze of the Temple of Apollo. The Fifth Century list for battles with Amazons is almost as long. These were to be seen at Athens, in painting, within the Theseum and the Painted Stoa, and, in sculpture, perhaps on the western

¹ In mural painting, however, historical battle-scenes were not uncommon at any period. The reason for this divergence from monumental sculpture is obscure.

² The Frieze of the Parthenon, although inspired by actual contemporary events, is not strictly historical. It presents a generalized and idealized picture of recurring celebrations.

Lycian sculptures, such as those on the "Nereid Monument" at Xanthus, are excluded from the statement made above.

metopes of the Parthenon and certainly on the shield of the cult-image in that temple; at Phigalia (Bassae) on the frieze of the Temple of Apollo; at Olympia on the throne and again on the foot-stool of the cult-image in the Temple of Zeus. Such are the facts, so far as known, for public buildings and statues. At a humbler level the same subjects figure frequently on the contemporary painted vases of Attica.

What is the explanation of such iteration? A current answer to this question regards these mythical battles as symbols of other, more real and more important, achievements. This general view takes somewhat different forms. Some authorities see in the contests against Centaurs and Amazons covert references to the glorious struggle of Greece against Persia. An eloquent presentation of this interpretation is given by Professor G. Baldwin Brown.¹ The passage is too long to quote, but the gist of it is conveyed in the sentence, "The victory over Persia inspired indirectly all the monuments of the culminating period of Greek sculpture."² Other writers, believing in a symbolic interpretation, read the symbols in a more general way. It is enough to quote Professor Percy Gardner,³ in whose view the metopes of the Parthenon present "the story of the development of order out of chaos, and civilization out of barbarism."⁴

I do not believe in any one of these symbolic interpretations. It is, of course, impossible to prove that no such ideas were entertained by any Greek. But I think it can be made probable that neither the artists who designed the works in question nor the general public understood them in that way. To speak affirmatively, I maintain that the Athenians and other Greeks of the Fifth Century, as well as earlier and later, took the mythical contests now under consideration simply at their face value. The overthrow of the invading Amazons by the Athenians was an important event in the legendary history of Attica. The subject, then, might and probably did stir patriotic emotions among the Athenians. Outside of Attica it had little, if any, patriotic significance. As for the battle of Lapiths against Centaurs, the

¹ *The Fine Arts* (4th ed.), pp. 82-86.

² See also Colvin, *J. H. S. I.*, p. 109; E. Gardner, *Handbook of Greek Sculpture* (1915), p. 495; Roscher, *Lexikon der griech. u. röm. Mythologie*, vol. II, 1038, 1039.

³ *Principles of Greek Art*, p. 315.

⁴ Similar views are expressed by Overbeck, *Geschichte der griech. Plastik*, I, 425; Curtius, *History of Greece* (Am. ed.) II, 623.

Attic hero, Theseus, did indeed take part in it. Nevertheless it was not for the Athenians a national exploit, and accordingly it was not included, as the amazonomachy sometimes was,¹ in the series of great Athenian achievements. In general, I should say that these two stories stood on a par in the minds of the Greeks with other mythical stories, such as that of the Argonauts or that of the Calydonian boar-hunt. They were interesting in themselves and they were on a heroic scale; but they conveyed no reference to events other than themselves.

Several considerations lead to this conclusion. In the first place, it must be borne in mind that the tales of Centaurs and Amazons originated at an early period. Just what set them going it is fortunately needless for present purposes to inquire. Long before the Persian Wars these stories furnished material for artistic representation. Thus the battle of Lapiths and Centaurs appears on the Hesiodic Shield of Heracles, associated with other mythical and with genre subjects. Among the numerous scenes on the Throne of Apollo at Amyclae and the Chest of Cypselus the combat of Heracles with Centaurs found a place. Among extant monuments the François vase, dating from about 560 B.C., has on one side a somewhat extended Lapith-Centaur battle, while on the architrave of the temple at Assos Heracles pursues a group of Centaurs. It is needless to cite additional examples. Contests of Greeks with Amazons also begin to appear on the black-figure vases of the Sixth Century. There is nothing to suggest that in this period Centaur-stories and Amazon-stories had any more meaning than the numerous other tales of the artists' repertory. It is, of course, conceivable that after the great experiences of the Persian Wars these stories took on a new significance; but some positive proof of this ought to be produced before we can accept it.

Now—and this is the second point—there is no ancient authority for the symbolic interpretations under discussion. Considering the extreme meagerness of our ancient sources of information regarding Greek art and especially regarding the popular appreciation of art, this objection is not fatal. But it should at least give us pause. The only passage, I believe, in extant ancient literature which attempts to give a reason for the employment of centauiromachy or amazonomachy in art is Pausanias V, x, 8.

¹Isocrates, IV, 68; VI, 42; VII, 75; XII, 193; Ps.-Lysias, II, 4-6; Pausanias, V, xi, 7.

There the writer, after describing the centauromachy in the western pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, adds this comment: "Alcamenes, it seems to me, represented this scene because he had learned from Homer that Pirithous was a son of Zeus, and because he knew that Theseus was a great grandson of Pelops." (Frazer's translation.) This explanation shows at least that in Pausanias' time the centauromachy was not understood as a symbol for the Persian Wars or for the victory of civilization over barbarism. If such an understanding was current in the Fifth Century B.C., it must have died out.

In the third place, if we are seeking to divine the ideas underlying Greek monumental art during its great period, we are bound, not to single out a few subjects, however popular, but to survey the entire field. What do we find? The range of mythical material employed is considerable. Thus, among the subjects with which Polygnotus and the other painters of the generation following the Persian Wars adorned the walls of public buildings in Athens and elsewhere, we find the visit of Odysseus to Hades, the slaughter of the suitors of Penelope, the seizure of the Leucippides by Castor and Pollux, the return of the Argonauts, the expedition of the Seven against Thebes. The Temple of Athena at Tegea, an important building of the early Fourth Century, had in its eastern pediment a group representing the Calydonian boar-hunt. Is it likely that these compositions suggested hidden patriotic meanings? And, if not, is it not arbitrary to assume that other compositions, drawn from the same great storehouse of mythology, were invested with symbolic significance?

In the fourth place, we find centauromachies and amazonomachies used in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries under circumstances where their supposed symbolic meaning would be inappropriate. I refer to the Heroön at Trysa in Lycia and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. The former of these must have been the funeral monument of some Lycian chieftain. Even if he claimed to be a Greek, as Benndorf supposed, he was a Persian subject. So was the Carian satrap to whom the Mausoleum was erected. We have to strain probability a good deal in order to believe that subjects currently understood in Greece as typifying the successful resistance of Greece to Persia were used to adorn these edifices. Even the vaguer significance of the triumph of Greek civilization over barbarism would seem out of place.

Finally, there is an argument which appears to me to have considerable value. Whereas in a gigantomachy the gods are, of course, unmistakably victorious over their enemies, in a centauiromachy or an amazonomachy there is, as a rule, but slight indication, if any, of victory. Pausanias (I, xvii, 2) describes as follows a painting by Micon: "In the sanctuary of Theseus there is also painted the battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths: Theseus has already slain a Centaur, but the others are fighting on equal terms." (Frazer's translation.) Of the twenty-three metopes of the Parthenon with Centaurs and Lapiths six give a decided advantage to the Lapiths; six show apparently undecided struggles; eleven, including the four in which the Centaurs carry off women, give the advantage to the Centaurs. Take again the centauiromachy on the west frieze of the so-called "Theseum." There, to be sure, the Lapiths outnumber the Centaurs by two, but otherwise there is nothing to indicate which side is to gain the day. This apparent indifference to the outcome of the contest goes so far that on red-figure vases we sometimes find, represented alone, the incident of the Lapith Caeneus being rammed into the ground by two Centaurs.¹ Now it is true that a Greek, looking upon any of these scenes, could have felt no doubt of the general issue; that was fixed in legend. But if the artists had really intended to suggest by allusion a Greek triumph, is it likely that they would have balanced the antagonists so equally and even have detached from the story an incident of Lapith defeat?²

What then is the explanation of the popularity in Greek art of centauiromachy and amazonomachy? In my opinion there is no need to hunt for any far-fetched explanation. These subjects commended themselves to the painters and sculptors of the Fifth Century and later, partly because they were drawn from famous and honorable exploits, but chiefly because they afforded an inexhaustible variety of artistic themes. Add the self-perpetuating power of a fashion once established and you probably have the whole story.

¹ *E. g. Mon. Ant.* IX, Pl. 2, a vase-painting by Polygnotus, dating about 460 B.C.

² Contrast the painting of the Battle of Marathon in the Painted Stoa, where, although at one side the struggle was undecided, the rout of the Persians was made clear (Pausanias I, xv, 1). In those parts of the frieze of the Temple of "Wingless Victory" which represent a battle or battles between Greeks and Persians the superiority of the Greeks is marked.

This will seem to some a lame and impotent conclusion. It would indeed be agreeable to believe, with Professor Baldwin Brown (*The Fine Arts*, p. 83), that "the primary conception of Greek as opposed to barbarian . . . —Hellas against the non-Hellenic—formed the fundamental theme of Greek monumental art." But this is a modern illusion. It must dissolve if the evidence be critically examined.

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